



A MILITARY TEA-PARTY.

COMMENDABLE and beyond all praise is the custom which has now become regular, that the children of parochial and other schools shall have one day in the summer devoted to a pleasant outing, and we do not know a more gratifying sight than the happy faces that peep at us from the vans bound for Epping Forest or Petersham Park; but certainly the largest and most picturesque open-air festival the writer has ever witnessed is that of the

schools attached to the regiments encamped at Aldershot.

The wives and children of the private soldier are no longer huddled out of sight; their existence and their needs are recognised by the State; and every one who lives near our army centres is familiar with the neat uniform of the regimental schoolmasters. At the close of each year the local papers record the seasonable gifts provided by the officers and ladies connected with the corps to the little ones who are born in the bustle of military life—rarely knowing the comfort of a settled home—playing now on the turf of the Curragh or the sandy common at the North Camp, and tomorrow on board a troop-ship bound for Gibraltar or Madras; and yet amidst all changes and discomforts growing up smart, shrewd, and healthy.

But acceptable though Christmas gifts may prove, especially when presented through the medium of a Christmas-tree, and supplemented with tea, cake, and oranges, the great event of the year is the summer treat. For this the loan of some neighbouring park is generally asked, and cheerfully accorded. Several of these military tea-parties have been held in the very pretty park attached to Farnham Castle, the residence of the Bishops of Winchester; and the late Bishop Sumner, even when failing speech and ill-health had induced him to live in great retirement, was still able to enjoy the animated scene, standing up in his carriage ere he departed, and baring his hoary head to acknowledge the cheers of the children gathered *en masse* around him.

All the preparations for this pic-nic are made with soldierly precision. The number of guests to be provided for varies with the number and strength of the regiments, or battalions of regiments, stationed in the camp, but we believe that it is rarely under 1,800. Some hours before the time appointed for their arrival at the spot selected, a detachment of the Army Service Corps, with their baggage-wagons, put in an appearance. Some of them set up huge boilers in a convenient nook, and range near them rows of the shiny, queerly-shaped cans or pails, from which the mugs of

the thirsty juveniles are to be filled; while others erect bell-tents—one for each school, with a pennon fluttering from it which bears the name or number of the corps to which it is attached, besides marquees for the accommodation of the teachers and ladies who interest themselves in the Sunday as well as the daily instruction of these little ones. A Punch-and-Judy show is already on the ground, and the proprietors of a merry-go-round—also hired for the occasion—are setting up their fiery coursers; whilst two or three of the most agile of the soldiers have climbed a couple of the fine old oak and chesnut trees, and knotted to the most convenient branches some stout ropes for swings, which will be extensively patronised in the course of the afternoon.

And now it is nearing three o'clock; there is not a cloud in the sky to mar the festivities, and the happy children begin to arrive—not afoot, nor in twos and threes, but drawn by stout horses in the great transport wagons, converted for the nonce to the pleasanter uses of peace.

Winding down the hilly road, through the park-gates, and then across the sward, frightening away the dappled deer to some secluded covert, comes the lengthy cavalcade, the scarlet or blue tunics of their drivers and the soldiers in charge lighting up the scene vividly as the wagons halt for a moment in the broad shadow of the trees, and then emerge once more into the sunshine.

With plenty of bustle and fun the children are assisted to alight. Then the wagons are drawn up in a long line—horses picketed—the two brass bands, which are to play alternately, set up their music-stands; a party of the elder boys organise a game at cricket, others are already scrambling after a foot-ball tossed amongst them; the tall Hussar in charge of the swings is besieged by a small crowd; the horses and carriages of the roundabout are all appropriated, and a ring of candidates for seats are impatiently awaiting their turn; the voice of Punch has gathered about his stage all within sound of it, young or old; the Army Service men stir the fires under their boilers, and the mounted officer, who has taken upon himself the control of the affair, rides round and looks well satisfied.

There are few *contretemps*, and there is no confusion. Every one engaged in ministering either to the wants or pleasures of those little ones has his certain duty to perform, and it must be done just as promptly and carefully as if he were on duty or at drill. At the bugle-call each child takes its place on the grass in front of the tent bearing the name or number of the regiment. Occasionally a little dot, who has strayed from her companions, gets confused, and then the question is not, "Whom do you belong to?" but "*What?*" and the answer comes oddly from baby-lips, "Please, I'm in the Army Hospital," or "the Dragoons."

So many of the soldiers are told off to wait upon

the tea-drinkers; so many more bring forward the piled baskets of provisions, which have been made ready beforehand, every child's portion—a goodly one—being enclosed in a paper bag, at the bottom of which is very often found some pleasant surprise or other.

Visitors troop into the park to see the children at their feast, or their games, to which, as their appetites are satisfied, and the day grows cooler, they return with increased zest; the music, exquisitely played by the fine regimental bands, attracts scores of attentive auditors; equestrians canter up just to see how the children of "ours" are enjoying the pleasure they have subscribed to promote, the bronzed and weather-beaten face of some *vieux militaire* telling a tale of familiarity with scenes very different to these. Soldiers' wives stroll about watching the frolics of their offspring, or sit on the grass and gossip with their friends; the Irish lassie, who has left Galway to follow the fortunes of her soldier laddie, mingling her soft coaxing brogue with the harsher utterances of the North country woman, who has come down South for the first time. Here glides by an officer's young wife, whose dark eyes and olive skin proclaim her the native of a sunnier clime than ours; and there stands a sweet-faced English matron, waiting for the little son and heir who has petitioned for just one turn in the ring with the children of "papa's" troop.

Every regiment in camp is represented here to-day, and amongst the spectators may be seen soldiers of all grades, from the imposing drum-major of the "death or glory boys," the 5th Lancers, or a trim farrier of the Artillery, to the little fifer of the Rifle Brigade, and the merry, swarthy corporal of a West Indian corps.

These tall lads in the neat undress of the Hussars, who are roaring at the vagaries of Punch, are recruits who have not long left their village homes, but are changed already by drill and discipline into creatures wholly unlike the cowherds or farm labourers of a few weeks ago. Close beside them comes a portly sergeant-major, but not stern and pompous, as we have been wont to see him at the march past in the Long Valley or on the parade ground, but suiting his steps to those of the tiny daughters clinging to either hand, and listening indulgently to their chatter. A little child runs up to claim acquaintance with a fiercely-moustached dragoon as "my teacher," while not far off stands a stalwart Highlander, one of those martial-looking soldiers whose dirk and sporran, flowing plaid, and long black plumes waving wildly, always carry us back to those days when the "Scottish Chiefs" ranked next to "Ivanhoe" in our romantic imaginations. But this imposing Gael is dandling the baby instead of brandishing his claymore, while his wife snoods the long fair hair of the little romp who irreverently calls him daddy! A little further away the boys are racing for knives and other prizes, and on a tolerably level bit of sward nearer the band, half a dozen of the soldiers, having contrived to secure partners, are waltzing—and waltzing well—to the strains of the Manola.

One long-drawn note on the bugle and the dancers stop short; the bandmen restore their instruments to their cases and pack up their music; the horses are harnessed, and, as before, without confusion, no matter how great the noise, these hundreds of little children are carried back to their homes in the huts, the town, or the permanent barracks. A couple of troopers sit on their well-trained horses beside the park gates, and not a wagon is permitted to pass until the school-master or soldier in charge has given proof that every child committed to his care is with him. The tents are taken down, the proprietor of Punch shoulders his stage and retires into private life, the visitors disperse, and the day's outing is over.

The point in which it has always seemed to us to differ from school feasts in general is the precision that is brought to bear upon it, and makes it so great a success. All who are connected with schools are kindly anxious to promote the enjoyment of the children, but how many there are who do not know how to set about it, or neglect to map out in advance the day's proceedings, so that everything may work well and pleasantly! We have a vivid recollection of seeing a large party of children marched along a dusty road till the smaller of them began to fret with the heat and fatigue, in order to reach a meadow lent for the occasion; and, worst of all, discovering when they reached their goal, that the resources of the cottager who was to have supplied the tea were so limited that it had to be taken in relays, and many even went without.

We can also recall how a flock of tall, awkward girls, an advanced class in a suburban school, stood helplessly in a corner of a bare, bleak common—the only available bit of ground—vacantly glancing at a well-meaning lady teacher who, with a battledore in her hand, tripped to and fro exclaiming, in sprightly tones, "Now, children, run about and enjoy yourselves!" and doubtless went home very much fatigued with her exertions. It was a good-natured clergyman who came to the rescue, and routed them out of their shyness; he identified himself with them—not only suggested games, but played them with such zeal and spirit, that we are sorry to say he left a coat-tail in the hands of his too-eager pursuers, and finally utilised his young friends by entrusting to their care for the homeward journey the tiny ones who could not be left to take care of themselves.

How the eyes of those young sempstresses glisten when, as they sit at their work in their close London room, they recall their day's outing! "The ladies was kind; oh, yes!" assented to coldly; "but the Rev. Mr. Blank—ah, he was a gentleman, wasn't he?" and this time one of them adds, "He did it all as if it were a pleasure to him!"

And there surely lies the secret of giving enjoyment to others: leaving nothing to accident, no matter how trivial; making one's plans, and carrying them out with the precision of the military tea-party we have been describing; and last, but not least, nor always easiest, doing all that falls to our share as if we took a pleasure in it.

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